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## CATHOLICITY IN VIRGINIA DURING THE EPISCOPATE OF BISHOP MCGILL (1850-1872)

A study of the life and times of Right Rev. John McGill, D.D., third bishop of Richmond, possesses historic interest, not only because it brings us in touch with one of the most picturesque, learned, and—from a Southern standpoint—most influential of the earlier American bishops, but also because it gives us an insight into the difficult conditions which confronted the Church in the South during the stormy times of Knownothingism, as well as in the dark days of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Period.

During his more than twenty-one years' rule over the See of Richmond, Bishop McGill was prominent in the South as a fearless leader of Catholic thought, a veritable intellectual giant, being exceeded in depth of mind and general learning possibly by only one of the American bishops before his time—the renowned Bishop John England, of Charleston (1786-1842), whom he also resembled in many other respects. In strength of character and tenacity of purpose, Bishop McGill was not unlike that other remarkable prelate, partly his contemporary, whose name stands as a synonym of priestly power and courage, the Most Rev. John Hughes, first Archbishop of New York (1797-1864). A large photograph of His Grace with an autograph sent to the Bishop of Richmond, together with extant letters that passed between himself and Bishop McGill, indicate not only a warm friendship between the two prelates but even an ardent admiration of the one for the other.

John McGill was born in Philadelphia, November 4, 1809, of Irish parents, with whom he went, in 1828, to Bardstown, Ky., and where, two years later, he entered St. Joseph's College, graduating with the highest honors. Having studied law with signal success, he was about to begin what promised to be an eminent legal career, when he recognized a divine call to the priesthood, and entered the diocesan Seminary at Bardstown, where he attracted the attention of his professors by his unusual depth of mind and his varied talents. He was ordained by Bishop David on June 13, 1835, and was appointed assistant-priest

of the Church of St. Louis, Louisville, and later pastor of St. Peter's Church, Lexington. He made a profound impression on priests and people by his exceptional zeal and general efficiency. He journeyed to Europe in 1838, in order to accompany Bishop Flaget on his return trip to America.

As editor of the *Catholic Advocate*, Father McGill won renown as an able thinker and controversialist. So convincing was his reasoning that he silenced a number of anti-Catholic opponents in their attacks upon the Church. The articles contained in several bound volumes of the *Catholic Advocate*, which are preserved in the Bishop's library now at Richmond, show a skill of diction and a strength of logic which should rank the name of John McGill high as a writer and apologist. Among the subjects he treated during his years in Louisville, may be mentioned an English translation of Audin's *Life of Calvin* and a criticism of Macaulay's *England*. The rare qualities he displayed in his writings and his zealous activity gave him much prominence, and we find him soon chosen as Vicar General of the Louisville Diocese.

A pontifical brief, dated July 23, 1850, announced the creation of the new See of Wheeling with the transfer to it, as first Bishop, of the Right Rev. Richard Vincent Whelan, of Richmond, and the appointment to the latter See of the Very Rev. John McGill. The transfer of Bishop Whelan was at his own request and was prompted by zeal and humility, because he deemed the See of Wheeling a more difficult one. His life during his twenty-four years he occupied his new See, was that of a veritable apostle. Bishop McGill was consecrated by Archbishop Kenrick of St. Louis in St. Joseph's Church, Bardstown, on the tenth day of November, 1850. He was the first Bishop of Richmond to reside permanently at the Cathedral. Bishop Kelly, the first Bishop, lived at Norfolk, whilst Bishop Whelan, the second bishop, resided at his Seminary in the suburbs of Richmond.

The advent of the new Bishop to Richmond marked also the departure from the city of Lowell, Mass., whence he had come, of the Rev. Timothy O'Brien, one of the most remarkable priests who ever labored in the Old Dominion. In 1834 Father O'Brien built St. Peter's Church, which later became the Cathedral, and founded within the city St. Joseph's Girls Orphan Asylum.

Through his instrumentality, various members of some of the most illustrious families in the South were led into the Catholic Church, including Hon. John Floyd, ex-Governor of Virginia, with his wife, Mrs. Letitia Preston Floyd, sister of Gen. Francis Preston of the War of 1812, and the following children: Hon. Benjamin Rush Floyd, a staunch opponent of Knownothingism; Col. George Rogers Floyd; Dr. William Preston Floyd; Mrs. Letitia Floyd Lewis; Mrs. Lavalette Floyd Holmes, wife of the noted Prof. George F. Holmes of the University of Virginia; and Mrs. Nicotai Floyd Johnston, wife of the United States Senator, John W. Johnston, himself the brother of Gen. Joseph E. Johnston and the father of Richmond's renowned surgeon, Dr. George Ben Johnston. Hon. Anthony M. Keiley, Mayor of Richmond and afterwards Judge of the International Court, Egypt, in his *Memoranda of the Catholic Church in Richmond* (Norfolk, 1874), refers to Father O'Brien's departure as follows: "Shortly after Bishop McGill's arrival, Father O'Brien left the Diocese amidst the universal respect of the people of Richmond of all denominations, and the tears and regrets of Catholics of every age and condition. To the administrative ability, tireless zeal, devoted piety and varied talents of this courageous and beloved priest, Catholicity in Richmond owes more than to any other individual priest in her history. His name and memory will ever find a warm place in the grateful hearts of our people."

When Bishop McGill took charge of the See of Richmond at the end of 1850, he found within the diocese only eight priests and ten churches, with a scattered Catholic population of between six and seven thousand souls. Of the new Bishop, Judge Keiley, whom we have already quoted, says: "Bishop McGill enjoyed and deserved the praise of eminent abilities as a preacher and a writer, and his unblemished character commanded universal respect." Because of his eloquence, Bishop McGill was selected to preach in the Baltimore Cathedral the funeral eulogy over Archbishop Eccleston, who died April 22, 1851; a task which he performed with singular earnestness and success. The following year, the Bishop purchased the lot adjoining his Cathedral, with a house which he used as his episcopal residence. In 1854 he preached the sermon at the dedication of St. Joseph's

Church, Providence. That same year he journeyed to Rome, where he was present, on December 8, when Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Whilst in the Eternal City he purchased the valuable oil paintings, the *Crucifixion* and a *Pietà*, which now adorn St. Peter's sanctuary, in Richmond. The latter is considered a rare work of art. The Bishop signalized his return to the Diocese by the enlargement of his Cathedral and by the erection of the present plain, but imposing, marble high altar.

During the year 1855, the tidewater section of the State was devastated by yellow fever, which carried off a large proportion of the people. The dreaded plague proved the means of manifesting to the world that unflinching courage and heroism which have ever characterized the Catholic priesthood. Father Matthew O'Keefe of Norfolk and Father Francis Devlin of Portsmouth were indefatigable in their attention to the sick and dying of all classes and creeds. They not only gave spiritual help whenever possible, but also, to a large degree, afforded material assistance, bringing to the stricken and to the needy, money, food, medicines and clothing. The difficulty of obtaining laborers, who feared personal contagion, obliged both priests frequently to dig the graves, and, with their own hands, to bury the deceased victims. In spite of continual exposure to the plague, Father O'Keefe did not contract the disease, Providence decreeing for him many future years of singularly efficient labor, both in Virginia and in the Baltimore Diocese, to which he was recalled in 1887. He died at Towson, Maryland, on January 28, 1906. At his death, it was touchingly related that during his long priestly career of fifty-four years, he had responded to all the calls that came to him from the sick and dying except one, and that because he himself was at the time on his death-bed. He endeavored to rise from his bed in order to attend the call, but was gently forced back upon the pillow, whilst one of his assistants hurried to the dying parishioner.

A martyr's fate awaited Father Devlin of Portsmouth. Stricken with the disease which he contracted from his attention to the sick, and brought almost to the point of death, his constitution rallied from the attack. During his convalescence, he was warned by the physician in charge not to resume his labors

amongst the plague-stricken, under the probable penalty of losing his life. Yet, as a priest, he felt he could not turn a deaf ear to the sick and the dying, who were clamoring for assistance both spiritual and material. Accordingly, once he was able to leave his room, he immediately renewed his unremitting labor of apostolic zeal and charity. Again stricken with the malady, he gave back to God his truly devoted soul. Within a few feet of St. Paul's majestic church, at Portsmouth, stands a monument, simple, yet stately, on which may be read the following inscription:

ERECTED  
BY THE CITIZENS OF PORTSMOUTH

TO THE MEMORY OF

REVEREND FRANCIS DEVLIN,

THE HUMBLE PRIEST,

THE FAITHFUL PASTOR,

WHO SACRIFICED HIS LIFE,

IN THE CAUSE OF CHARITY,

DURING THE PLAGUE OF 1855.

HE WAS A NATIVE OF LONGFORD, IRELAND,

DIED ON THE SEVENTH OF OCTOBER,

IN THE FORTY-FIRST YEAR OF HIS AGE.

In October, 1855, the Very Rev. John Teeling, D.D., Vicar General of the Diocese, was summoned before a Richmond Court, to testify in a murder case against John Cronin, later proven to have fatally wounded his wife, whose confession Dr. Teeling had been able to hear immediately before her death. Upon the judge's ordering him to reveal the subject-matter of the confession, Dr. Teeling replied, "Any statement made in her (the victim's) sacramental confession, whether inculpatory or exculpatory of the prisoner, I am not at liberty to reveal." Upon being repeatedly questioned in various ways, the priest finally explained to the Court the motives for the inviolable guardianship of the seal of the confessional. Whereupon, the presiding judge, John A. Meredith, pronounced the following decision, known thereafter as the *Teeling Law*: "I regard any infringement upon the tenets of any denomination as a violation of the fundamental law, which guarantees perfect freedom to all classes in the exercise of their religion. To encroach upon the confessional, which is well understood to be a fundamental tenet

in the Catholic Church, would be to ignore the Bill of Rights, so far as it is applicable to that Church. In view of these circumstances, as well as of other considerations connected with the subject, I feel no hesitation in ruling that a priest enjoys a privilege of exemption from revealing what is communicated to him in the confessional."

On October 13, 1855, Bishop McGill convened at Richmond the first Diocesan Synod ever held in Virginia, all the priests of the diocese, nine in number, being present, and the necessary legislation was enacted.

The Knownothing Movement, which had swept like a storm over the country, invaded Virginia and aroused the Bishop to instant and vigorous action. The defeat of the movement in the Old Dominion was quick and complete, but not without arousing very bitter feeling. Judge A. M. Keiley, in his *Memoranda*, graphically describes the subject: "In September, 1855, he (the Bishop) became engaged in a newspaper controversy with Robert Ridgway, Esq., the editor of the *Richmond Whig*, and concluded one of the most caustic letters in the history of American newspaper disputes, with the following sentence, whose prophecy of the shameful death of Knownothingism was verified sooner than seemed to all probable: 'When Knownothingism has become in history a name, as it did once before in the days of Lactantius, the Church, which you would destroy, will still rest immovable upon the Eternal Rock where it was planted and is sustained by the Hand of God.' No party ever died so early and so scandalous a death." The overthrow of the Knownothing Movement in Virginia, which was practically complete by the end of 1855, the year of notable happenings within the Richmond Diocese, was not due to Bishop McGill alone, but also to a large extent may be attributed to Henry A. Wise, who had just been chosen Governor of the State on the Democratic ticket, his election being due, principally, to his well-known antagonism to Knownothingism and its principles. In a letter which appeared in the *Richmond Enquirer* shortly before his election, Wise thus emphatically expresses his anti-knownothing sentiments:

"And lastly (say the writers of the Declaration of Independence) for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our

fortunes, and our sacred honor. There was tolerance, there was firm reliance on the same God; there was mutuality of pledge, each to the other, at one altar, and there was a common stake of sacrifice of lives, fortune and honor.

"And who were they? They were Hancock the Puritan, Penn the Quaker, Rutledge the Huguenot, Carroll the Catholic, Lee the Cavalier, Jefferson the free-thinker. These were representations of all the people of all the colonies.

"O my countrymen, did not that pledge bind them and us, their heirs, forever to faith and hope in God and to charity to each other, to the tolerance in religion, and to mutuality in political freedom? There the names stand together amongst the signatures, and I will redeem their mutual pledges with my life, my fortune, and my sacred honor, so far as in me lies—so help me Almighty God!

"I am a Protestant by birth, by baptism, by education, and by adoption I am an American—in every fibre and every feeling an American; yet in every character, in every relation, in every sense, with all my head and all my heart and all my might, I protest against this secret organization . . . to proscribe Roman Catholics and naturalized citizens!"

Wise's election, as his grandson, Barton H. Wise, in his *Life of Henry A. Wise* describes it, was the "entering wedge" towards the breaking up of the Knownothing party in the South. In fact, since the Knownothings had carried the gubernatorial and legislative elections in California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Rhode Island, the result of the Virginia election had been keenly watched throughout the North in general and the above States in particular. After the election, a vast throng called upon Wise at Brown's Hotel, in Washington. His eloquent and fiery speech, frequently interrupted by the Knownothings present, concluded with these significant words: "I have met the Black Knight with his visor down, and his shield and lance are broken." The collapse of the Knownothing movement was followed in Virginia by marked Catholic progress. Additional priests were ordained, churches, schools, and two hospitals constructed, and new parishes founded. Meantime, the fame of Bishop McGill as a deep thinker and as an eloquent speaker caused his services to be considerably in demand outside the diocese. Thus, for example, for the consecration in the Baltimore Cathedral of the Very Rev. John Barry as Bishop of the new Vicariate Apostolic of Florida, on August 2, 1857, Bishop McGill was chosen to preach

the sermon, as he was selected for a similar function at the consecration of Bishop Lynch, in Savannah, March 14, 1858.

The raid of John Brown at Harpers Ferry (October, 1859), and the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency (November, 1860), were, as is well known, material factors in precipitating the Civil War. Even after the Cotton States had seceded, Virginia at first strongly upheld the Union which she had been notably instrumental in founding. She even brought about a peace conference of the States at Washington, February 4, 1861, but with no practical results. On the day of the conference, Bishop McGill issued a pastoral, in which he said: "The fortunes and fate of our beloved country are now trembling in the scales, and we know not what ruins and disasters may be impending. Our chief hope is in the merciful providence of God. Let us pray to Him who holdeth in His hands the fate of nations, to control events, so as to conduce to His own greater honor and glory, and to the greater good of the people."

Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops was the culminating act that practically forced Virginia from the Union. The vote of the General Assembly for secession was passed by a small majority, April 17, and was ratified by the people, May 23, 1861. Jefferson Davis having been chosen President of the seceding States, the Confederate capital was removed from Montgomery, Ala., to Richmond, May 21, 1861. Although a northerner by birth, Bishop McGill was decidedly southern in his sympathies. The energies of his strong mind and personality were steadfastly directed towards the success of the Confederate cause. When arms were taken up to protect their State from invasion, he urged upon his people, as a solemn and pressing duty, their obligation of assisting the leaders. The Catholic men enlisted in various companies, those of Richmond being members principally of the Emmet and of the Montgomery Guards. The priests of the Diocese served, wherever possible, as chaplains to the Confederate soldiers. Amongst those who obtained renown may be mentioned Rev. Joseph Plunkett of Portsmouth, Rev. Matthew O'Keefe of Norfolk, and the Very Revs. Thomas Mulvey of Petersburg and John Teeling, D.D., of Richmond, the two Vicar Generals of the Diocese. Bishop McGill himself frequently attended the Northern soldiers confined in Libby

Prison, Richmond, and, when prevented from doing so in person, sent different priests of the city in his stead. Amongst the priests who labored in the Virginia camps as chaplains to the United States troops may be mentioned Revs. Father Scully and Mahoney and the Jesuit Fathers O'Hagan, McAtee and Tissot. The Sisters of Charity were already within the State, and many others came for the purpose of nursing the soldiers. Together with the Sisters of Mercy, they performed valiant services amongst the sick and wounded soldiers of both sides on the battlefields and in the various camps and hospitals.

As was to be expected, the injury suffered from the Civil War by the Church in the South in general, and in Virginia in particular, was almost incalculable. In many cases congregations were broken up or reduced to insignificant numbers, composed mainly of old men, women and children, by far the greater number of able-bodied men and youths having enlisted as soldiers. Churches and schools in many parts of the diocese were temporarily turned into hospitals. The church at Winchester was used as a stable by the United States Cavalry, and later burned. Within the walls of St. Joseph's Church, Martinsburg, sixty horses were stabled by the Jesse Scouts, who also used the sacristies of the church as prisons. Confederate troops were quartered in St. Vincent's Church at Bath, which later was accidentally burned. The floors and walls of St. Mary's Church, Fredericksburg, were literally bespattered with the blood of the wounded and dying soldiers brought there for hospital treatment. The army regulations did not permit the Bishop to journey over the Diocese, and when not engaged in works of priestly duty or charity, he occupied his time to advantage in the composition of two learned books: *The True Church Indicated to the Inquirer*, and *Our Faith, the Victory*, which have been reprinted under the general title: *The Creed of Catholics*. In their preface, the publishers thus eulogize the work and its author: "In logical arrangement, in its completeness, and in the beauty of the language used, the *Creed of Catholics* is surpassed by no work of its kind in the English language. Bishop McGill shows a familiarity with the writings of the Fathers nearly equal to that of Dr. Moehler in his famous *Symbolik*. Modern theories on religious subjects were also well known to him, and, while

not directly alluding to them, he completely demolished the popular objections to the Catholic Church." Bishop McGill's refined intellectual taste and general accomplishment of mind are best shown, perhaps, by the rare and valuable books collected, used and transmitted by him to his successors, the Bishops of Richmond. The several thousand volumes left by him embrace practically all the works of the greatest Fathers, with other profound scriptural, theological, liturgical, historical, and miscellaneous writings.

When the war was over, Virginia entered upon a period which is considered by Southern writers as the darkest in her entire history. With part of her original territory formed into another state, a large proportion of her noblest sons killed or maimed, with her families reduced and scattered, her industries paralyzed, her government burdened with an enormous debt, and with the negro problem to hamper her efforts at rehabilitation, her former prestige as a State was practically at an end. Virginia faced a situation such as literally tried the souls of her sons and daughters. To add to the difficulties enumerated above, she had to meet the further difficulty arising from the coming into the South of numerous adventurers and office seekers from the North. Many were unscrupulous, corrupt, and given to fraudulent practices, and, because of the receptacle in which they usually brought all their personal belongings, were contemptuously referred to by the southerners as "Carpet Baggers."

After the surrender of Lee and Johnston, Bishop McGill was permitted by the Federal authorities to journey over his diocese, and his heart was torn by the evidences he beheld on all sides of the frightful destruction which resulted from the war. The work of upbuilding the religious life of his Diocese had practically to be begun anew. In a fervid pastoral, dated February 2, 1866, the Bishop referred with words of sadness to the ravages caused by the war. He condemned in scathing terms the unbridled license, the dissemination of error and indifferentism, and in general the vices which existed. His voice was raised in fatherly warning and the remedies for existing evils were pointed out in his words in no uncertain terms. He inveighed in particular against dangerous amusements and organizations, and appealed to his flock to make every sacrifice in favor of Catholic

education for the children. The efforts of the Bishop towards the religious restoration of the Diocese met with the valiant cooperation of his hard-working priests and his impoverished people, with the result that, as soon as order arose from the chaos, a steady Catholic development followed, which has continued uninterrupted until the present day.

With the close of the mighty conflict, Bishop McGill turned his attention in a special manner towards the building and repairing of churches and schools and the reorganization of old and the establishment of new parishes. For the purpose of teaching, he brought into the Diocese the Sisters of the Visitation and augmented the number of the Sisters of Charity. Bishop McGill took a prominent part in the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore which was opened by Archbishop Spalding, October 7, 1866. He was one of the prelates chosen to preach during the sessions of the Council. His sermons then delivered were considered models of learning and eloquence, and were printed in America and later reprinted in Europe. In 1868, he established at Norfolk a Diocesan Seminary which he placed under the direction of the Revs. Matthew O'Keefe and G. Vanderplas. Owing both to lack of students and means, it was discontinued after a few years, and the students sent to other Seminaries. On August 16, of that same year, the Rev. Thomas A. Becker, D.D., a Virginia priest of unusual brilliancy of mind, was consecrated by Archbishop Spalding as first Bishop of Wilmington, Del. The following October, the Rev. Francis Janssens, D.D., later Bishop of Natchez and Archbishop of New Orleans, came to the Diocese. The Rev. J. J. Kain, who subsequently became Bishop of Wheeling and afterwards Archbishop of St. Louis, had at this time attracted the attention of the church authorities by his remarkable work in the Valley of Virginia. In October, 1870, there came into the Diocese the Rev. Augustine Van De Vyver, who was destined later to rule over the See of Richmond longer than any previous Bishop.

In 1869, Bishop McGill journeyed to Rome, where he took part in the Vatican Council. His return to the Diocese, towards the end of 1870, marked his decline in health. Apparently he had a premonition of his end, for when he visited his Kentucky relatives in 1871, he bade them a tender farewell. On his return

to Richmond, his health grew rapidly worse. His preparation for death proved most edifying. His great soul went to God on January 14, 1872. An immense concourse of clergy and laity attended the funeral. "Few events," wrote Judge Keiley, "have occurred in Richmond working a larger measure and a more decided expression of sympathy from all classes." His body was interred in the basement of the Cathedral, and a suitable memorial tablet being shortly thereafter erected in the Church.

As in the case of Bishop England of Charleston, so with Bishop McGill, regret may be felt that it was not his lot to have presided over a larger See where the Catholics were more conspicuous in numbers and in power. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that, because of their eminent personalities, united to truly wonderful abilities, both prelates wielded an influence for good amongst the larger non-Catholic element much greater than would have been possible outside the fold in a larger Catholic community, where they would necessarily have been less thrown in contact with their non-Catholic brethren. Aside from his unusual mental ability and character and the general good he accomplished for the Church in the South during his episcopate of twenty-one years, the individual part he played in the overthrow of Knownothingism and his particular labors for religion during the trying period of the Civil War and Reconstruction have inscribed with honor the name of John McGill, third Bishop of Richmond, on the immortal pages of American Church history.

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